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Source: *Labour History*, No. 25 (Nov., 1973), pp. 19-39

Published by: [Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, Inc.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27508091>

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PIECE WORK AND SOME OF ITS CONSEQUENCES IN THE PRINTING AND COAL MINING INDUSTRIES IN AUSTRALIA, 1850-1930

J. HAGAN AND C. FISHER

In this article we wish to consider the effects of piece-work payment on the piece-workers' attitude towards their work, their fellow workers, the management and the union. We examine two industries, because we hope that comparison will help identify those attitudes which are attributable to piece payment, as distinct from those that may be attributed to other circumstances. We have chosen the period 1850-1930 because this is a relatively large time span in which piece-work practice remained fairly constant in the two industries compared. The method of comparison allows us to arrive at some low-level generalisations which suggest further—and new—questions about the history of the Australian labour movement. Looking at the coal and printing unions from the bottom up in this way yields a different view of them, and suggests that this might be a fruitful method of approach to the histories of other unions.

THE JOB AND COMPENSATION

The jobs which miners and compositors had to do may be set out fairly simply. Although they worked at different tasks in vastly different circumstances, in both cases these men exercised a skill and worked towards a 'fair wage'. This they could earn by producing so many units of work for which they were paid by the piece. There were, however, many ways in which they could be prevented from exercising their skills and earning a satisfactory wage. The physical difficulties and complexities of the job could stop work or slow it down and thus reduce wages. For these difficulties miners and compositors demanded compensation.

Under a piece-work system the worker is paid at a specified rate per unit of output.¹ In the coal industry the basic unit of output was the ton of coal. At the end of the working shift the miner was credited with so many tons of coal, for which he was paid at the end of the week, fortnight or month. This system, the 'contract' system, persisted in the majority of N.S.W. mines until it gradually gave way to machine work on time wages after the Second World War.² For more than a century the job done by most miners, and the principle of payment for it, remained fairly much the same.

To get his coal,³ the man lay down on his side before a wall of coal, the 'face', perhaps raising and supporting his shoulder on the back of his shovel blade, and with his pick undercut the coal to a depth of from a few inches to four or five feet. Then with his pick he separated the face

1. International Labour Office, *Payment by Results*, Geneva, 1951, p. 8.

2. R. A. Gollan, *The Coalminers of N.S.W.*, Melbourne, 1963, p. 18.

3. *Report of the Royal Commission on the Safety and Health of Workers in Coal Mines*, Sydney, 1939, Section X; H. R. Jones, *The Miners' Next Move. A Plea for the Abolition of the Contract System in Coal Mines*, Sydney, 1916, pp. 6-7; and Gollan, *The Coalminers of N.S.W.*, pp. 18-26.

coal from the coal in the side walls (the 'ribs') and the large block thus left clinging to the roof and the wall behind he brought down onto the floor of the working place by pick, wedges or explosives. If the coal was very hard or if the size of the coal did not matter then he would bring down the face by explosives alone, without undercutting. Once the coal was down it was loaded by shovel or fork into skips and taken to the surface. At the surface the coal was weighed and the man who cut it credited with his tonnage. All this seems straightforward enough, but there were many ways this simple set of procedures could be disrupted.

The nature of the miner's physical working environment could hinder the performance of his basic tasks. There was constant danger from large-scale movements of the roof or at least from minor falls of roofstone, ranging in size from pieces of considerable weight to small, sharp-edged splinters. The amount of time spent in putting up timber to secure the roof and the complexity of the timbering technique used varied with the condition of the roof exposed as the face advanced. Face and ribs too were both dangerous and unpredictable. Coal, once loosened, may fall inward upon the working area in slabs of varying size, or slide in unexpected directions when being worked at close range with a pick or shovel. Variations in the height of the seam, the width of the face, and the hardness of the coal affected the size of falling stone and coal, the amount of working room, the weight on the roof supports and the ease with which the coal could be worked. Water in the roof, floor, or coal made timber and tools difficult to handle, reduced the miner's speed and freedom of movement and made the coal heavier. If there were bands of stone or clay in the face, they had to be separated from the coal and thrown back. Gas, coal dust in the air and perhaps poor ventilation made the work yet more dangerous and complex.

The miner had to be able to adapt to all these conditions, which might change greatly in the course of a single shift. Failure to adapt meant perhaps serious injury or death. More frequently it meant loss of output, and, with it, some of his wages. In the day-to-day order of things this was of prime importance: the miner had to earn a living wage. Just how much money made up this wage or what constituted an acceptable living is probably now not possible to tell, if indeed it ever was. Expressions like 'to make wages'⁴ are vague, but they express the notion that there was some level of earnings which the man judged to be satisfactory. If the floor, roof or sides of his working place were in poor condition then a man might spend hours in work that was perhaps essential to his safety, but which either was unpaid or was poorly paid. For work like this he demanded compensation.

Miners' wage agreements and awards reflected these demands. Justice Davidson complained that: 'unsuccessful attempts have been made to enumerate, co-ordinate the list (of compensations) but no-one appears to be acquainted with all of them and at any moment antiques may be unearthed'.⁵ Such a list will not be attempted here. But although exact and exhaustive classifications are difficult, still, a broad principle may be set out: the minute details of the job were made explicit and each part made the subject of demands for compensation, called 'con-

4. Illawarra Colliery Employees' Association v. Southern Colliery Proprietors' Association, 1902, *Transcript of Evidence*, Vol. 1, p. 221. Hereafter shortened to: *T.E.*, 1902.
5. C. G. W. Davidson, *Coal in Australia. The History and Status of Industrial Relations and Welfare Work*, Address to the Australian Institute of Mining and Metallurgy, Sydney (n.d., cyclostyled), p. 23.

siderations', if in some way the miner thought his work was interfered with unfairly. Two examples may be given in which the demands for compensation are given added point by the fact that they were concerned with practices thought to be important to miners' safety.

The safety lamp may be thought of as an outstanding improvement in mining practice: the enclosed wick did not allow the same risk of gas or dust explosion as the naked flame of the tallow light. But according to one miner, 'I made up my mind never to work with them. I would sooner go and take any job than take up a Safety Lamp to work with it. I call them horrible things.'⁶ Part of the trouble was that the lamp did not throw off enough light and the miner could not see properly to pack the coal into his skip. As well:

There is also a loss of time entailed if a miner's Safety Lamp goes out—he has to go from the place where he is working to obtain a light. . . . During the time he is going for the light his mate has often to sit down as his lamp has had to be taken away. . . . I do not consider that one penny half penny per ton now being asked as an increase for the use of Safety Lamps sufficient compensation for the disadvantages.⁷

The erection of a bar, a wooden slab across the roof of the tunnel supported by props at either end, was often, like the Safety Lamp, essential to a man's safety. Simply, it stopped the roof from falling on him. However, putting up bars interfered with the work, stopped production, and the miner demanded compensation for his losses:

(The erection of a bar) . . . is a matter of great difficulty and labour. It requires a good deal of time and prevents the miners getting on with their work. The practice in local mines is to have bars erected where the management directs. To erect a twelve-foot bar would take nearly half a day's work for two men—one man could not do it.⁸

Consideration was paid for dozens of circumstances. Of thirty-nine clauses in a 1934 Western District agreement for both miners and other labour, at least eighteen, and half of two other clauses, are solely referable to contract miners.⁹ To these rates are added yet further complicated adjustments and compensations for turning away new places, wet places, baling water, waiting time, deficient places, pillar working, yardage in pillar work, lagging roofs and cutting sumps.¹⁰ Clearly, a central preoccupation of the miner on piece rates was protection of himself against loss of earnings because of difficulties in his physical working environment.

The printer paid his piece-work compositor a certain price for each

6. *T.E.*, 1902, p. 227.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

9. *Agreement between the State Coal Mines Control Board and the Australasian Coal and Shale Employees' Federation*, reprinted in the *Report of the Commission upon the Coal Mining Industry*, Canberra, 1946, pp. 175-181.

10. There is little point in defining the less obvious of these terms, except to say that they refer to jobs the miner might have had to do and which could substantially reduce his output.

thousand 'ens'¹¹ of all type set and corrected. After the introduction of linotype machines in the 1890s, agreements and awards provided that payment be made on the basis of a multiplier which varied according to the size of the type and length of the line set. The principle remained exactly the same. The piece-work compositor was virtually a subcontractor who agreed to perform a certain task—to set up accurately in type the copy for a pamphlet, a hand bill, part or all of a book, part or all of a newspaper—in consideration of a payment offered for each unit of work completed.

For about four centuries after Gutenberg's invention, the compositor set type in the same way. He stood before a frame which supported two cases into the compartments of which a complete set of type of a particular style and size—called a fount—had been distributed. His left hand held the 'stick', a small tray open at one end with a side that could be screwed in or out to suit the measure of the lines to be set. His right forefinger and thumb picked type from the case, and placed it in the tray from left to right. When the letters of the first line were assembled in order, the compositor inserted spaces as required, and read for errors. This done, he placed a small metal rule against the first line of the set type to give himself a smooth working edge, and began to set the second. He continued this way until his stick was full of type, and then glanced over it quickly again, before transferring it to a larger tray called a galley. He then collected his next 'take' of copy, walked or ran back to his case, and started setting again. This process continued until the galley was full, and a 'proof' was pulled from it. If there were errors in the matter he had set, the compositor then corrected them.

With the invention of the linotype about 1890, the setting of type by hand gradually gave way to the setting of type by machine. To operate the linotype, the compositor depressed keys which released matrices corresponding to the letters and spaces he wished to set. These travelled to the machine's 'stick'; the compositor then operated a pump which forced molten metal over the matrices. When the 'Line o' type' had cooled, the compositor set in motion a saw, which neatly trimmed the 'slug'. Then, like the hand compositor, he transferred the matter set to a galley, corrected it as required and picked up his next 'take'.

Both hand composing and machine composing made similar sorts of demands on the compositor. Either way, the compositor had to be able to interpret his copy, and correct formal errors in it. Both operations required keen eyesight, considerable manual dexterity, and a capacity to think ahead and calculate the size of the spaces required to 'justify' the line—that is, to make it end even. These operations required intense concentration, even when the compositor was not setting rapidly—as he usually was.

A variety of difficulties could slow down the compositor's setting rate and so diminish his earnings to such an extent that the basic piece rate would no longer return him what he regarded as a fair sum for the time he spent on the job. Foremost among these was the quality of the copy. Some copy was illegible, or was so misspelt and ungrammatical that the compositor had to correct it before he could set it. Other copy was difficult to set in that it made use of mathematical symbols, or

11. The letter 'm' in all early founts occupied the full square of the body of the type, and the letter 'n' half of this area. Printers therefore adopted the 'em' and the 'en' as units of measure. For the purpose of calculating wages paid by the piece, the 'en' was adopted rather than the 'em' because it represented fairly well the average width of all letters set.

statistical tables, or quotes from foreign languages. Sometimes the copy was divided into takes so short that the compositor lost an undue amount of setting time by having to wait for new copy.

The Chapels¹² therefore adopted rules that were designed to compensate the piece-worker for having to set poor copy. The printer had to present fair copy in takes of a minimum size.¹³ Difficult copy attracted a penalty¹⁴ and to ensure that each member of the Chapel had a fair sample of copy to set, copy had to be distributed as it came.¹⁵ There were other rules designed to compensate for difficulties that arose from the type size or length of line to be used. For setting the smaller type sizes the Chapel charged a rate higher than for setting the larger, and for setting measures less than a specified breadth it charged a proportion extra.¹⁶ The Chapel also imposed a penalty for changing the sizes of type or line as a compensation for setting time lost.

II

OTHER PIECE-WORKERS

As much as difficult copy or bands of stone in coal, other workers could cut down the amount of coal a miner could get or the amount of type a compositor could set. The piece-worker exercised an individual skill and his job both encouraged and demanded a vigorous independence of others and a regard for what he felt to be his self-interest. G. D. H. Cole wrote that piece-work methods of payment are:

for the most part a crude appeal to individualism and it is generally agreed among Trade Unionists that where they are adopted the morale and sense of solidarity among the workers are often lowered. They tend to set each man's hand against the other's and inaugurate a system of cut-throat competition between worker and worker.¹⁷

A similar argument was offered by a delegate to the first (Australian) miners' convention:

The contract system breeds the most selfish spirit it is possible to breed. It brings out the cave man and when the whistle blows in the morning, when men are sitting down quietly enjoying a little joke of some kind, the whistle for work blows and you have to get out of the road or be trampled to death. Men will go into the mine and they will try by every means possible to pinch one another's skip or their coal. It breeds that selfishness that is not good or conducive to good comradeship.¹⁸

There were many ways in which miners could interfere with another man's work. They could work in his place and perhaps leave it in such

12. A Chapel was the shop organisation of compositors and pressmen. Moxon's *Mechanick Exercises*, written in 1683, refers to the Chapel as 'having been established since time out of mind'.
13. *Sydney Morning Herald* Chapel, Minutes, 6 October 1858.
14. The 1916 Award in New South Wales listed eleven kinds of difficult copy for which penalties were payable. See also *Australasian Typographical Journal*, Vol. XVI, Nos. 180 and 197, July 1885 and January 1887.
15. *Sydney Morning Herald* Chapel, Minutes, 5 October 1852 and November 1854; also *Australasian Typographical Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 12.
16. *Australasian Typographical Circular*, October 1858.
17. G. D. H. Cole, *The Payment of Wages*, London, 1928, p. 77.
18. Australasian Coal and Shale Employees' Federation (Workers' Industrial Union of Australia—Mining Department). *Report of the First Miners' Convention*, 1925, p. 160, cited in Gollan, *The Coalminers of N.S.W.*, p. 171.

a state that he had to waste time in cleaning it up or in some other way making it fit to work. They might steal his skips, they might use his picks and blunt them, or they might steal or lose his tools. Miners' Lodges¹⁹ adopted rules and resolutions to guard against this sort of interference. Woonona Lodge, in 1892, resolved that 'any man that has a place to work in and goes into another man's place be fined 10/-'.²⁰ At Mt. Pleasant in 1924 the Lodge fined a man 10/- for having another man's pick and warned him that they would refuse to work with him if it happened again.²¹ The same Lodge in 1928 posted a notice at pit-top warning off-hand labourers against using miners' tools.²²

The 'darg' or 'turn' was a rule which specified the maximum number of skips each miner could have to fill in a given period and the order in which they would go to each man or pair of men. The rule had many purposes, one of which was to stop mineowners from stockpiling coal against strikes. But most importantly it was used by the men to discipline one another, to prevent miners interfering with other miners. Again, the need for this discipline arose from the piece-work system and the spirit of competition it fostered in men:

There are men who are called sharks—who work until they drop. We despise them because they want more than their share. I do not believe in a man taking what does not belong to him—more than his share. I believe in a man having an average. I despise the shark or man that works until he drops.²³

. . . We are working a section of the mine and being particular friends with the person controlling the skips a certain number of skips more are sent to that part than are distributed in another part of the mine. At the end of the fortnight, one party, although no better in regards their physical ability than another, may have £1 per man more than the other section. Every man has his family to keep and should get his share of what is going if he can do the work.²⁴

Similarly some of the difficulties in the way of a piece-work compositor's maximising his earnings resulted from the behaviour of others who wished to do the same. Anticipating the demands of copy, compositors were sometimes tempted to stock their cases with more than their share of type of a particular fount or size. Chapels frowned upon this practice, framed rules to prevent it, and punished those who broke them.²⁵

They also recognised that the compositor did his best and fastest work when he could concentrate all his attention on his setting. Distractions put

the operator out of his stride; his operating rhythm is being continually broken, leading to definite uneasiness and jerkiness of the hands. He is continually uncertain as to where, in the copy, he stopped setting. . . . The resultant jerkiness of the hands causes the fingers to foul adjacent keys . . . bringing down unwanted letters which have to be lifted out of the assembler and put on one side to

19. The 'Lodge' is the organisation of miners at each pit.
20. Woonona Lodge, Minutes, 10 October 1892.
21. Mt. Pleasant Lodge, Minutes, 19 November 1924.
22. *Ibid.*, 24 December 1928.
23. *T.E.*, 1902, Vol. 1, p. 261.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 105.
25. *Sydney Morning Herald* Chapel, Minutes, 1855-58, *passim*.

be later sent through . . . and so the little delays accumulate.²⁶

Much the same applied to hand composing. From the early days of the trade, Chapels' rules forbade distracting practices in the composing room, and by their authority the Chapel fined those who whistled, played practical jokes, fought, or came to work drunk.²⁷

III

THE PIECE-WORKER AND THE MANAGEMENT

As much as physical difficulties presented by the nature of the type and copy, and the sorts of difficulties that arose between the piece-work compositors themselves, the management's decisions could restrict piece-work compositors' earnings. Proprietors or their managers were often tempted (for reasons of speed, or cheapness) to 'farm out' copy to compositors who were not members of the Chapel. Newspaper proprietors also tried to save money by 'dummifying'—filling up their paper with 'standing matter',²⁸ or by adopting a layout which took up considerable space with rules or designs, so that there was less setting to do. Sometimes the management diminished the compositors' earnings by failing to supply copy continuously, thereby keeping the compositors standing between 'takes'.²⁹

Chapels therefore adopted and enforced a series of rules which penalised these practices. If matter were set by compositors who were not members of the Chapel, the Chapel still had to be paid as if its members had set it.³⁰ All lines and rules were to be charged for as if they were lines actually set,³¹ and when corrections were made to standing blocks, the compositor whose 'take' the correction was had to be paid as if he had set the whole space occupied by the block in solid matter.³² This was 'fat' to the piece-work compositor—and proprietors perennially attempted to avoid paying it by giving out 'fat' copy to one of the time hands.³³ It was harder for them to circumvent the rule designed to compensate the compositor kept waiting for copy. He had to be paid 'standing time' at the time hands' hourly rate.

These rules, like those concerned with the nature of copy and type, aimed at maximising the freedom of individual piece-workers to do their work without hindrance. Owners and managers concurred in such rules, and conceded the Chapel authority to arbitrate in the event of dispute between the men. They appear to have done so because they recognised that the Chapel could organise these aspects of industrial relations better than they could themselves, and were therefore willing to cede to the Chapel some of the authority they exercised over their wage workers.

26. J. Jones, *The Analysis of the Occupation of a Linotype Operator*, Melbourne, 1947.
27. Moxon's *Mechanick Exercises* records such rules in 1683. They persisted into the nineteenth century and still partly survive. See, for example, Gibbs, Shallard and Company's *Chapel Model Rules*, Sydney, 1908; and *Sydney Morning Herald* Chapel, *Rules*, 1967.
28. I.e. type already set which the printer thinks he may be able to use again.
29. Copy to be set is divided into 'takes' to be distributed among the compositors for setting.
30. Victoria Typographical Union, Minutes, 19 August 1869. The Melbourne Typographical Society, Minutes, 30 November 1867, record a successful claim by compositors of the *Age* Chapel for a penalty payment as well.
31. Melbourne Typographical Society, Minutes, 16 July 1870.
32. *Ibid.*, 15 October 1870.
33. Ballarat Typographical Society, Minutes, 7 October 1859; and *Australasian Typographical Journal*, Vol. XIX, No. 213.

The Chapel's authority rested on its expression of the collective will of its members; the members' first consideration was maximum independence in the performance of their job.

Another example of the piece-worker's assertion of independence, and the corresponding cession of authority by employers, was the employment of 'grass' hands.³⁴ If a piece-work compositor who held a 'frame' decided that he did not want to work on a particular day or night, the management recognised his right to put a 'substitute' or 'grass' compositor in his place. This was common practice, and some 'grass' lists numbered about a quarter of the frames at the printing office concerned;³⁵ the demand for grass, it seemed, was particularly heavy on Friday and Sunday, and on public holidays.³⁶ Until late in the nineteenth century the compositor himself paid his substitute and whether or not he would employ grass on a particular occasion was a matter for him alone.

But such assertions of independence should not be taken to mean that piece-work compositors were not willing to co-operate quite closely with owners and their managers. The compositors' independence itself depended largely on the keeping of agreements negotiated between Chapel and management, and these agreements the Chapel kept faithfully.³⁷ This ability to make and keep agreements over a long period of time was one of the influences which helped produce among piece-work compositors an attitude that often favoured collusion rather than conflict with employers.

Another influence in the same direction was the high earnings that swift piece-workers managed to maintain. In 1853, compositors at the *Argus* earned up to £18 a week,³⁸ when wages for skilled masons on piece-work were about £6-£8.³⁹ In the 'seventies and 'eighties, the 'whips' on metropolitan morning dailies seemed to have earned about two to three times as much as the best paid of the building artisans.⁴⁰ In 1904, when the equivalent of the Federal basic wage was about the same or a little less than the £2.2.0 of the Harvester Judgement, the fastest of the Sydney operators maintained for a day a setting rate that would have earned him between £12 and £13 for a working week of 42 hours.⁴¹ In 1926, when the N.S.W. State basic wage was £4.4.0, the piece-work compositors at the Sydney *Sun* averaged over £12 a week, and those at the Melbourne *Herald* £12-£14. The fastest men at the *Herald* earned over £14.⁴²

Such high earnings meant that the piece-work compositor himself might reasonably hope to become the proprietor of a small newspaper or printing business. In May 1860, the *Australasian Typographical Circular* noted that all those piece-work compositors who had left the *Sydney Morning Herald* had gone 'as part or sole proprietors of provincial journals'. Through the 'seventies and 'eighties, the price of well-established newspaper businesses in substantial country towns remained

34. The term apparently derives from the French 'grâce'.

35. *Australasian Typographical Circular*, January 1859.

36. *Australasian Typographical Journal*, No. 500, June 1914.

37. The Chapels of the metropolitan daily newspapers struck on only ten occasions between 1850 and 1920.

38. *Argus*, 1 January 1864.

39. T. A. Coghlan, *Labour and Industry in Australia*, p. 721.

40. Coghlan (*ibid.*, p. 1440) quotes wage rates for building artisans in Sydney at about 12 shillings a day in 1882-3—the highest since 1857.

41. *Australasian Typographical Journal*, No. 381, July 1904.

42. *Printing Trades Journal*, Vol. X, No. 1.

well within the reach of swift compositors;⁴³ in 1908, the Editor of the *Australian Typographical Journal* referred to 'Proprietorship (as) an opportunity which might any day come to any one of them',⁴⁴ and the biographical notes on successful members and ex-members make it clear that the transformation of man into master remained common into the 1920s.

Thus piece-work offered the compositor the incentives of high earnings and social promotion. Samuel Smiles supplied a supporting ideology, which many of the craft eagerly adopted. Piece-work compositors were especially in favour of frugality and abstinence, the latter not only because it saved money, but because intemperance interfered with maximum performance. The *Australasian Typographical Circular* in 1859 warned against compositors meeting in taverns and being 'drawn into a seductive vortex of dissipation'. 'Chapel, take my tip,' wrote the Editor of the *Australasian Typographical Journal* in 1891, 'beer, 'bacca, and business don't mix. Business first, beer and 'bacca afterwards, that's it.'⁴⁵ Over twenty years later, another editor of the same journal noted with satisfaction that '... in these days of "lynetylpers", "topers" are increasingly conspicuous by their absence'.⁴⁶

For those men most convinced of the efficacy of self-help, it followed that the unemployed and impoverished were either poorly skilled, lazy, drunken, or perhaps all of these things. In 1886, the *Australasian Typographical Journal* concluded that those out of work 'must be terribly poor applicants' for whom 'steady work (is) positively distasteful', and 'who must have their periodic booze'.⁴⁷ The depression of the 'nineties modified but did not remove opinions of this kind.

The 'improving' piece-work compositor's sense of superiority found expression in other ways. Until the 1920s he usually came to work in stand-up collar and tie, and not infrequently in bowler hat and frock coat.⁴⁸ The right to put 'grass' in his frame when he wished endowed him with other outward and visible attributes of an employer. The 'grass', whose earnings depended largely on the wish of the piece-worker, repeatedly requested the printing unions to use their influence to abolish their inferior status. The compositors managed to hold off all attempts to abolish grass lists until 1925.⁴⁹

In sum, the piece-work compositor was a man who valued independence in his work, but knew that the large amount of it he possessed was the outcome of a series of bargains reached between his Chapel and the owners and managers. As a high income earner, he had before him the prospect of proprietorship, and developed a proper contempt for the poor and lazy. As a sub-contractor he could endow himself with some of the attributes of an employer. He insisted on retaining this right, and often did what he could to make it visible. The piece-work compositor found it difficult therefore to believe that their employers belonged to another class and were essentially enemies. Employers, like

43. In January 1881, the *Australasian Typographical Journal* advertised a 'News and jobbing plant, four presses, 200 founts, nearly new, £392'. In March 1882 it offered a 'Newspaper, large plant, 700 subscribers, paying well, £500'. In November 1883 it reported that two compositors had bought the Inverell paper for £1,000.

44. *Australasian Typographical Journal*, No. 423, January 1908.

45. *Ibid.*, Vol. XXII, No. 256.

46. *Ibid.*, No. 499, May 1914.

47. *Ibid.*, Vol. XVI, No. 182.

48. Several old workers in the printing industry can remember this characteristic of the 'God-Almighty-Compositor'.

49. *Printing Trades Journal*, Vol. VIII, No. 4.

associates in other businesses, might well be guilty of stupidity, sharp practice, even cheating, but they did not practise systematic exploitation.

Compositors sometimes modified this attitude, but did not replace it with one that assumed necessary conflict between employer and employee. In the 1880s, the *Australasian Typographical Journal* wrote frequently of the need to assist the 'fair employer' in his struggle against his 'unfair competitor' or 'sweater'—who paid low wages and employed boys in excess of the time-honoured ratio of one to three.⁵⁰ In Victoria in these years the 'fair employer' was a Protectionist, and it was the duty of compositors to help him in his efforts to expand the Australian Printing Industry.

The 'fair employer' survived the strikes and depression of the 'nineties, and the stresses of the First World War.⁵¹ In 1922 the Queensland branch of the Union helped found in his honour the Joint Industrial Council. This was an association of masters and men that agreed upon a scale of charges for employers, and a scale of rates and wages for employees.⁵² On at least one occasion the Council decided on a strike in the shop of an unco-operative employer, and the 'fair employers' paid the strike pay.⁵³

The miner protected himself against his fellow workers, but probably his most important need was for independence of mine management. The perennial and bitter nature of disputes between miners and management about hewing rates and compensations has been made clear by Gollan.⁵⁴ The contract system, which gave rise to these disputes, was described by Mr. Justice Davidson as 'one of the most potent of all causes of dissension in the industry throughout its whole existence. . . . Practically all these irritants have their source in the contract, or piece-work, system of payment by results'.⁵⁵ What perhaps needs to be made more explicit is the frame of mind which piece-work engendered in the miner: a vigorous independence which was incompatible with subordination to managerial direction and authority. Of the effect of piece-work on managerial authority Brown wrote:

Day-to-day managerial work is concerned with allotting work, fixing targets and dates, deciding methods and assessing the work of subordinates. Wage incentive systems, however, tend to set up circumstances which are inconsistent with such managerial-subordinate relations because they have concealed within them the more important entrepreneur-sub-contractor relationship. . . . Wherever they (piece-work systems) exist, managerial control is at a discount. . . . The fabric of control and co-ordination is loosened. The sequence in which jobs are performed ceases to be wholly at the dictate of what is optimum for the company's manufacturing programme; new methods are delayed; the distribution of work between subordinates ceases to be based entirely on what is available or who can best do it; . . . subordinates are not criticised for unnecessary loss of output

50. E.g. *Australasian Typographical Journal*, Vol. XII, No. 155; and see also the evidence of the representatives of the Melbourne Typographical Society before the Royal Commission Inquiring into Employment in Factories and Shops.
51. Notice particularly the devices of the 'Fair List', and 'Union' label. Melbourne Typographical Society, Minutes, 18 March 1905; and N.S.W. Typographical Association, Minutes, 7 July 1902.
52. Queensland Branch of P.I.E.U.A., Minutes of Board Meetings, 1 February 1922.
53. The Strike was at the *Ipswich Leader* in 1924.
54. Gollan, *The Coalminers of N.S.W.*, pp. 23 and 55.
55. Davidson, *Coal in Australia* . . . , p. 23.

because in one sense they are 'paying' for such loss themselves.⁵⁶

Management-subordinates relations were out of place in contract mining. A miner might have worked a place for two months and become sensitive to the peculiarities of that particular situation. He might have developed a number of variations in working technique especially for that particular place, to keep his earnings at the level he required and to keep himself free from injury. If an official visiting the place were to give an order or to demand some change in the way the place was being worked he was likely to be simply an irritating, frustrating interference. Miners at South Bulli went home after the management posted a notice which read in part:

All coal to be properly hewn in accordance with the *Directions of the Management* and to be filled free from dirt, stone and bands, pit smalls to be filled only when required, any miners not observing the directions of the management or not taking sufficient care in hewing, or improperly forking the coal, or filling pit smalls with unscreened coal is liable to fine or instant dismissal at the option of the Manager. (Italics in Original.)⁵⁷

In practice, the day-to-day management of the pit was largely carried out by the miners. Since deputies visited working places once a day, and higher officials once a week or even less frequently, the ordering of his tasks was at the miner's discretion.⁵⁸ The distribution of work was not the manager's prerogative but was done through the 'cavil', a ballot for working places taken quarterly by the miners.⁵⁹ Trist and Bamforth, discussing managerial methods and work situation and relationships referred to the 'responsible autonomy' of the contract miner and his 'craft pride and artisan independence'.⁶⁰ According to the manager of Mt. Keira Colliery, in 1902, the 'reasonable and good' miner preferred contract to shift work, because

he has more liberty, he can do as little as he likes and as much as he likes, and earn as much money as he likes and as little as he likes.⁶¹

To 'make wages' was to have a level of earnings for himself which each man regarded as satisfactory. But the miner weighed the amount of money in his pay packet against the amount of time he spent in the pit. This calculation had little to do with 'what is optimum for the company's manufacturing programme' and might have been influenced by drink and sex habits, race meetings, temporary variations in the price of food and clothing or any one of the multitude of (to others) trivial items which might convince a man that he could afford to knock off early. Old miners make it clear that it is a source of considerable pride to them that when they were young they could have the best of both worlds: they could fill their turn or darg, if they wanted to fill that

56. W. Brown, *Piece-work Abandoned: the effect of wage incentive systems on managerial authority*, London, 1962, pp. 69-70.
57. Australian Labor Federation, Illawarra District Council, Minutes, 27 December 1898.
58. *Report of the Royal Commission on the Safety and Health of Workers in Coal Mines*, Sections IV(G) and XIII; and, *T.E.*, 1902, Vol. 3, p. 930.
59. *Report of the Royal Commission on the Coal Industry*, Sydney, 1930, p. 59.
60. E. L. Trist and K. W. Bamforth, 'Technism: Some Effects of Material Technology on Managerial Methods and on Work Situation and Relationships', in T. Burns (ed.), *Industrial Man*, Harmondsworth, 1969, p. 335.
61. *T.E.*, 1902, Vol. 2, p. 730.

much, and get out of the pit early.

That the miners could exercise this sort of independence was the result of the piece-work system:

It is a fact that they (the miners) are there simply to cut coal at so much a ton. There is no special agreement that I am aware of that will enable the Manager to compel the men to finish work before leaving. A man can leave off when he likes, at any hour of the day, without being liable to penalty.⁶²

That the decision to work or not to work was a private one, based on personal and not company needs, was emphasised by the employers' advocate before the same court. 'And if a man has some private attraction outside for any particular day,' he asked, 'there is nothing in the world to compel him either by law or agreement, to stay and complete his work?'⁶³ The 1930 Royal Commissioners were similarly concerned about 'private attractions':

Evidence has been given which demonstrates that, on frequent occasions, mines have been thrown idle on account of the attendance by employees at horse and dog races which provide undue means of gambling, not only at weekends, but also during working hours. We recommend that every effort be made to abolish these mid-week race meetings of every description and to reduce the number of such meetings at weekends.⁶⁴

The independent attitudes which were both required and fostered by the miners' jobs were, in the eyes of Royal Commissioners, managers, economists and the like, truculence, irresponsibility and lack of discipline. Taking a day off work was absenteeism and the self-imposed discipline of the turn was limitation of output.⁶⁵ That is all to say there was a considerable difference between the miners' and the employers' assumptions about the point of doing the job at all.

The self-interest of contract miners in their dealings with employers perhaps needs some emphasis. Ellis largely ignored the individual miner's self-interest. He ascribed the 'continued inability of colliery owners and employees to live in peace with each other' to three factors:

firstly, the inability of the miners to agree among themselves, even in crises; secondly, the ability of the union leaders to use the owner's differences of opinion to promote their own ends; thirdly, the elements of danger and intermittency, the sense of living in a different, lonely and depressed world which kept the emotions of the miners keyed up to a higher pitch than those of other industrial workers.⁶⁶

The third of these factors is fairly obviously misused by Ellis. The miner returned to the surface, he says, 'in conditions conducive to self-pity and to consciousness of his differences from other men', he was 'weary to the bone' and 'he could never forget coal'. Since the miner was under those stresses, 'it would have been unnatural in him if he had not sometimes

62. *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 51.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

64. *Report of the Royal Commission on the Coal Industry*, 1930, p. 171.

65. For example: *ibid.*, pp. 151, 156, 174; *Report of the Royal Commission on the Safety and Health of Workers in Coal Mines*, p. 289; and, A. G. L. Shaw and G. R. Bruns, *The Australian Coal Industry*, Melbourne, 1947, pp. 150-161.

66. M. H. Ellis, *A Saga of Coal*, Sydney, 1969, p. 150.

been captivated by the shining visions of the prophets of socialism who offered him the millenium if only he would follow the union line implicitly'.⁶⁷ Ellis here uses a crude psychologism⁶⁸ to draw a line between union and miners. He portrays miners, not as active parties in disputes with employers, not as men vitally interested in hewing rates and compensations, but as passive objects of manipulation by the union. Whatever may need to be said about the mental stresses of working underground at the face or about the relationship between rank and file and union officials, it is a fundamental error to ignore the self-interest of the individual miner.

The self-interest which made day-to-day independence from managements so important to miners also led them, on the other hand, to recognise that their own well-being was dependent on that of the industry. Prices, competition and the state of trade in general were obviously as much determinants of miners' wages as they were of companies' revenue. Indeed, these matters were probably more important to the miners in the very short run. The company might be able to make up in June some of the sales and profits that had been lost during the slack time in December. But while the work was slack the miner on piece-work made little or no money; he was subject to all the pressures that work on unemployed men. Consequently, miners were anxious at times to promote practical policies to regulate or revive or stabilise the industry.

The classic case is the struggle by miners in 1878 and 1879 to hold together the Vend in the Northern District.⁶⁹ The Vend was an organisation of collieries to control output and prices. Some of the northern collieries were not in the Vend and were selling below the Vend's minimum price. Since the piece rate for getting coal was linked to the selling price through a sliding scale the miners had a direct interest in maintaining the selling price. In 1878 they decided to strike at any colliery selling below the Vend minimum and in the following two years the northern miners' union acted against not only employers, but fellow miners at Lambton, to implement that and other decisions designed to preserve the Vend. Gollan notes:

At first sight it may seem extraordinary that the Union should attempt to prop up a monopolistic arrangement of employers, but in the circumstances of the time it was perfectly understandable.⁷⁰

It was understandable since the miners, both Lambton men and union men, were protecting not the employers, but themselves. Similarly in the Southern District, even after the strikes and years of slack work in the 'bad times', the 1890s, and after the Southern District miners' union had become a branch of the Labor Party, the union could still tell the employers:

That we consider the most effective method of successfully fighting the Coastal Steamship Companies will be to purchase or charter Boats to carry on the Trade and we are prepared to financially assist such an enterprise.⁷¹

67. Ibid.

68. Note also: 'There is no doubt that underground work is hard, unpleasant and lonely. Such conditions tend to maintain a psychological attitude of Strife', Shaw and Bruns, *The Australian Coal Industry*, p. 152.

69. Gollan, *The Coalminers of N.S.W.*, pp. 58-63.

70. Ibid., p. 58.

71. Illawarra Colliery Employees' Association, Minute Book, 8 April 1908.

Miners' attitudes to their industry have been to some extent misrepresented: Gollan argued that when socialist ideas began to influence miners' thinking from the late 'eighties onwards, they had to contest the ground with

the assumption that high earnings were a simple function of employer combination and high prices.⁷²

This statement has been misreported by McQueen. He wrote that Gollan had shown that

when the unions agreed to a sliding scale of payments for coal hewed they accepted the intellectual position of their masters who reasoned that wages were a function of *profits*. (Our italics.)⁷³

Gollan's statement may be based in the day-to-day experience of a piece-worker: employer combinations (like the Vend) meant regularity of work and high prices meant a relatively high hewing rate, more money for the miner and less time in the pit. There seems no reason to go beyond this and to see in miners' attitudes a parasitical, conscious dependence on profits. The vigorous independence of miners on piece-work was no more clearly displayed than in the case of the Vend struggles: some miners saw their interests in maintaining the Vend price; some, the Lambton men, in selling below the Vend minimum; and, far from accepting the 'intellectual position of their masters',

Although the union's action in limiting production was designed to preserve the Vend and with it the price of coal and the hewing rate, it was unacceptable to the associated masters.⁷⁴

IV

THE PIECE-WORKERS AND THE UNIONS

From the 1850s, Chapels in Australia spent most of their time discussing problems that arose from the operation of the piece-work system. They did acquire social functions, but these were quite subordinate.⁷⁵ Their main tasks were to negotiate the piece rate between their members and the proprietor, and to settle disputes among the members themselves.

The second of these functions took up far more time than the first. In a sample two-year period in the 'fifties, the *Sydney Morning Herald* Chapel formally heard and settled eight disputes over copy, seven over corrections, five over the employment of 'grass', four over the supply of type, three over changing from time to piece, and one over standing time.⁷⁶ Scores of other disputes between members were settled on the spot by the Father.⁷⁷ All piece-work compositors belonged to the Chapel, and they obeyed its decisions—since the Chapel had powerful means of enforcing them.

They belonged and obeyed also because the Chapel was necessary to the working of the piece system. But a union was not; good Chapel members who preferred to rely on their own skill, industry and sobriety held aloof:

72. Gollan, *The Coalminers of N.S.W.*, p. 57.

73. H. McQueen, *A New Britannia*, Blackburn, 1970, p. 208.

74. Gollan, *The Coalminers of N.S.W.*, p. 60.

75. *Sydney Morning Herald* Chapel, Minutes, 5 June 1855; 7 July 1857; 1 June 1858.

76. *Ibid.*, *passim*, 1856-57.

77. *Ibid.*, 2 June 1857; 1 December 1857; 2 March 1858.

Disguise it as they will, there are in this Colony as at home many men so disgustingly respectable that they would blush to do anything that would lead the world to believe that they worked for a living. To join a trade society would at once stamp them as working men, and the very idea is revolting to their 'well-constituted' minds.⁷⁸

None the less, some provident piece-workers could see advantages in the establishment of a union, and in the 'fifties the largest Chapels in Sydney and Melbourne persuaded other shops in the trade to join them in establishing typographical societies whose membership was open to all duly qualified compositors.⁷⁹ The societies' aims were strictly limited. They acted as houses of call, harassed 'rats', and did what they could to limit entrance into the craft. But they did not interfere with the Chapels. The Chapels continued to negotiate their own piece rates, and frame and interpret their own rules.⁸⁰

The Chapels—especially the Chapels of the metropolitan dailies—also dominated the Boards of Management of the societies. These therefore adopted policies that reflected the interests of piece-work compositors, some of which had important consequences both for the societies and for the trade union movement as a whole. The first of these was over the question of the eight-hour day.

Piece-work compositors were opposed to any limitation of their hours of work. As contractors with the right to work for as little, or as long each week, as they cared, they were willing to work longer hours to counteract the effect on their earnings of a reduction in the piece rate,⁸¹ and Chapels did not respond to complaints that their members were working excessive hours while other compositors were without work at all.⁸²

Thus they took no part in the great eight-hour campaigns of the 'fifties, although their union (in Melbourne at least) was relatively large and well organised. Thirty years later, the Melbourne jobbing offices, in which time hands had begun to outnumber piece-workers, won the eight-hour day; but the newspaper Chapels ignored suggestions that they too should seek the boon.⁸³ Their interest in limiting the hours of work came only fifteen years later, when the installation of linotypes made it necessary to limit the time a man could operate one if the work of setting the newspaper was to be spread among the Chapel members.⁸⁴ This belated and narrow interest cut the typographical societies off from the greatest single labour agitation of the nineteenth century.

Much the same can be said of the societies' general lack of interest in issues of health, safety, or even comfort in working conditions. Piece-work compositors showed great interest in the early deaths of their fellows, and attributed most of them to the type dust that accumulated in the crowded and ill-ventilated offices in which they worked. But despite some quite passionate statements⁸⁵ not once did they take or threaten

78. *Australasian Typographical Circular*, January 1859.

79. *Sydney Morning Herald* Chapel, Minutes, 4 July 1854 and 6 February 1855. The Strike of the Melbourne *Herald* Chapel members in February 1854 seems to have led to the formation of the Victorian Typographical Association.

80. *Australasian Typographical Journal*, Vol. LX, No. 106.

81. *Australasian Typographical Circular*, May 1859.

82. *Australasian Typographical Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 7; see also Vol. 5, No. 53, for hours worked by piece rate compositors.

83. *Ibid.*, Vol. XIV, No. 164.

84. A competent operator on Model One machines could set type four to five times as fast as a proficient hand compositor and by the early 1900s improvements to the machines allowed him to set five to six times faster.

industrial action to have owners reduce the dust in the air. Instead, they preferred to work at hazard, claiming compensation in higher setting rates for the shortening of their working lives. This preoccupation with loss of time extended to even a general lack of interest in establishing meal breaks of reasonable lengths.⁸⁶ With so little interest in their own working conditions, it is hardly surprising that piece-work compositors cared little about the attempts of other unions to establish safe working.

But the general refusal of typographical societies when dominated by piece-work compositors to involve themselves in the affairs of the trade union movement as a whole had other causes as well. These too had their origin in piece-work, and amounted to a general refusal to believe that working men had common problems that only united action could solve; or perhaps a refusal to believe that if such problems did exist, that they as piece-work compositors were working men in that sense.⁸⁷ We have already mentioned their lack of sympathy for the problems of the 'grass' hands, and their impatience with the poor and the unemployed. The staunchest believers in self-help extended their disdain to include fellow members of the craft who did not share their beliefs in the virtues of frugality and temperance. After a hot meeting of the Board of Management, in which the piece-workers did not get their own way, the Editor of the *Australasian Typographical Journal* lamented the

frothy, colonial beer-laden interjections of men who care not whether the Association sinks or swims so long as they can get drunk each Saturday night on their earnings or the earnings of some other fool.⁸⁸

This is not the language of the brotherhood of man. The piece-work compositor's sense of exclusiveness prompted him to keep the membership of typographical societies confined to compositors and pressmen, and, if possible, only those compositors and pressmen who had served a regular apprenticeship. Thus the societies showed no interest in recruiting the increasing number of men working at the new tasks that technical developments of the printing industry had created—until it was clear that they were more likely to damage the compositors' privileges if they were outside the society than if they were in it. The societies then were not likely to extend their interests to the common problems of a working class, and the piece-work members underlined the point by regularly refusing to march in trade union processions:

Our comps. are rather exclusive, and think it bad form to walk along crowded streets in a procession.⁸⁹

From the early 1880s, piece-work compositors found it more difficult to dominate boards of management, and societies occasionally adopted policies of which they disapproved.⁹⁰ Gradually the societies began to

85. See, for example, the *Australasian Typographical Circular*, March 1958.

86. There are still current stories of linotype operators who have their supper break in the few seconds it takes to cast and trim the line they have just set.

87. Note the comment of the Secretary in *Australasian Typographical Journal*, Vol. VI, No. 66: 'Nothing can be said against class distinctions (between workers) in an office.'

88. *Ibid.*, Vol. XIX, No. 218.

89. *Australasian Typographical Journal*, Vol. XVIII, No. 205.

90. This resulted from the expansion of job printing which employed more time hands than piece. By 1888, the morning dailies employed only about a third of the Melbourne Typographical Society's members but the composition of the Board of Management gave them influence beyond their numbers.

claim the right to negotiate with newspaper owners on behalf of Chapels, and even to regard the Chapel as a shop organisation of the Society.⁹¹ The result of this process was a succession of serious quarrels between Chapels and societies which argued the question of authority for over twenty years. The Chapels jealously asserted their authority—the more so since one of the issues was the retention of the piece rate system itself.

There were murmurs in the 'eighties, but the installation of linotype machines sharpened the issue. The *Australasian Typographical Journal* reported that, on the installation of linotypes in Sydney

Bonuses and promises of future advancement were dangled in front of the eyes of the poor dupes, who speedily wore out their enfeebled constitutions in their endeavour to make phenomenal 'strings' and so bolster up the machine which deprived their fellow craftsmen of the means of making a livelihood. There are men walking about in New Zealand apparently looking for some quiet nook to bury themselves...⁹²

To the arguments that sought the abolition of piece-work to protect the health of the operators, and spread the work, was added one which claimed that the substitution of time work would result in a better union:

. . . the piece-work system is barbaric, and has nothing to recommend it from the point of view of brotherliness. It is an extension of the doctrine of survival of the fittest. . . . A minimum time rate (would encourage) a spirit of comradeship that does not at present exist.⁹³

But despite these arguments, and a 'feeble attempt'⁹⁴ by the Society to have the newly installed machines worked on time, the piece-work Chapels got their way, and the linotypes were worked on the piece in all capital cities.⁹⁵ Later attempts to substitute time for piece-working were similarly unsuccessful, and payment by the piece remained the most common method of payment for machine composition until the progressive substitution of photographic for hot-metal setting over the last few years.

The independent attitude of miners sometimes affected relations between miners and their unions. That is to say, miners sometimes saw their interests as not identical with those of the union, or their fellow workers, just as they sometimes saw benefit in co-operation, not conflict, with employers. The union may be divided into several parts. First there were the miners, some of whom formed the Lodge at each mine. The Lodge elected officials, and also elected delegates to the district organisation, if one existed, and if the Lodge were a member of it. The delegates from member Lodges formed the delegate boards, or boards of management, which, presided over by another group of elected executive officials, managed the affairs of the district. After the federation of the districts in 1916, another layer of delegates and executive officials was added.⁹⁶ Some considerable emphasis has often been placed on this

91. *Australasian Typographical Journal*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 4.

92. *Ibid.*, Vol. XVII, No. 318.

93. *Ibid.*, No. 464, July 1911.

94. *Idem*.

95. In jobbing as well as newspaper offices.

96. *Report of the Royal Commission on the Coal Industry*, 1930, pp. 146-148.

structure as the sign and focus of unity among miners.⁹⁷ However, at various times there has been dissension among the various sections of the union.

The self-interest and clash of interest which at times affected relations between the miners, Lodge officials and higher executive officials may be catalogued at length, but a few examples must suffice here. The expulsion of the Lambton men from the northern union during the Vend struggle already referred to is again a classic instance of the incompatibility of some of the miners' self-interest, as they saw it, with the interest of the union. Similarly, there was little fuss in the Southern Districts when, since work was slack in the south, groups of Mt. Keira miners were readily recruited to work at the Co-operative Colliery in the Northern District, whose union members were on strike.⁹⁸ The impulse to unity was also missing from the Quarterly Delegate Meeting of the Illawarra Colliery Employees' Association in October 1908. The meeting rejected a motion to 'financially and morally' assist the Broken Hill miners in the event of trouble there, and instead resolved

That the General Secretary write to the Secretary of the Broken Hill miners informing them that we are working under an Industrial Agreement, and inquire if they intend to avail themselves of the provisions of the industrial laws of the country.⁹⁹

In 1894 the Southern District officials had themselves to deal with the problem of disunity. After the owners had reduced the hewing rate for the second time in one year, some collieries were laid idle by the miners, but some others stayed at work. The District officials called meetings at the villages where the miners were still working, and delegations from the striking collieries attended them. One such (poorly attended) meeting at Mt. Pleasant resolved that, by continuing work, the Mt. Pleasant miners were 'assisting to inflict incalculable injury upon the portion of miners refusing to accept reduced rates'. 'Therefore,' the resolution concluded, 'we appeal to you as men whose interests are one, to assist by laying down your tools.' The District Secretary complained that 'their performance of work at the present time bore upon it the impress of selfishness and wrong doing to men following the same occupation'.¹⁰⁰ Despite appeals and strictures of this sort, the Mt. Pleasant miners shortly afterwards balloted to remain at work.¹⁰¹

To write of disunity and dissension in this way is by no means to denigrate the achievements or the value of the union; rather it is to enhance them. The central organisations of the union, district and State, have always been limited and directed by the immense difficulty of achieving uniformity and regularity in the demands and purposes of men who worked in physical conditions which may have varied greatly from day to day, from place to place in the one mine, among mines and among districts and to whom these things were of first importance; in short, who were piece-workers. However, statements about the unity or solidarity of the 'union' or the 'miners' should make clear whether the miners, the union officials, or both are being referred to.

The separate sections of the union may have worked in consistently different circumstances to solve consistently different sorts of problems.

97. Gollan, *The Coalminers of N.S.W.*, p. 2.

98. *Illawarra Mercury*, 30 May 1894.

99. *Illawarra Colliery Employees' Association*, Minutes, 8 October 1908.

100. *Illawarra Mercury*, 17 January 1894.

101. *Ibid.*, 20 January 1894.

Piece-work in Printing and Coal Mining

The Lodges were the primary guardians of custom. The conditions of working at each mine, most especially the provisions for compensations and the forms of discipline that the miners imposed on each other, were set out in and protected and perpetuated by a complex maze of customs. The custom may have been formalised in written agreements and awards, but often only in a general form by 'saving all customs',¹⁰² or simply kept alive by use and in memory, to be passed on to new miners by the old hands. The special conditions which applied to a particular mine, as against those with general application to a number of mines, tended to be negotiated between individual employees and management officials, perhaps through the Lodge. The decision arrived at passed into custom, to be brought to bear in future negotiations in a way not unlike the use of precedent in common law.¹⁰³ The first concern of miners and Lodges was thus the particular set of problems at each mine, a concern not always compatible with the search by districts for uniformity in conditions and a common approach to employers. At a meeting of the Southern District delegate board in 1901, both these impulses, to uniformity and fragmentation, were apparent. One motion read that 'the rates for setting timber and the question of shiftmen's hours be made uniform throughout the District'. Bulli Lodge, on the other hand, thought that it was

. . . time to abandon the method of uniform hewing rates and seek differential rates sufficiently high to meet working conditions in the different District Collieries.¹⁰⁴

The stock of customs and practices, 'impracticable to collect and correlate',¹⁰⁵ posed other problems for officials. How could they know them all?

Though I am President of the Union I do not know the custom of any one mine in this respect, the exact conditions. I cannot tell the Court whether on this front and back shift the shiftmen are actually underground 10 hours or not—I cannot tell. I do not, either as President or a private individual, know how long is taken for meals.¹⁰⁶

On the other hand, it was vital to a piece-worker that anyone who was to have a say in matters which could affect his chances of earning a fair wage should know exactly what the job was and its difficulties. The annual general meeting of the Southern miners' union resolved in 1899 that

No person be permitted to act as a Branch delegate to any future Conference or Council meeting unless he has had at least five years' experience as a coal getter.¹⁰⁷

Private agreements between individuals and management,¹⁰⁸ lack of interest by men in the union, the way in which miners and Lodges turned a blind eye to breaches of District union policy if it suited

102. *Report of the Royal Commission upon the Coal Mining Industry*, 1946, p. 182.

103. Davidson, *Coal in Australia* . . ., p. 23.

104. Australian Labor Federation, Illawarra District Council, Minutes, 9 October 1901.

105. *Report of the Royal Commission on the Coal Mining Industry*, 1946, p. 182.

106. *T.E.*, 1902, Vol. 1, p. 50.

107. Australian Labor Federation, Illawarra District Council, Minutes, 8 April 1899.

108. Illawarra Colliery Employees' Association, Minutes, 8 May 1908 and 12 February 1909.

them,¹⁰⁹ were all further problems for the District officials and all reflected the primary interest of miners in what happened at their own pit.

In all these problems the needs of individuals clashed with the needs of an institution which to some extent required the individual to suppress himself in favour of some larger entity, 'the union' or the 'working class'. The existence of these problems is itself evidence that individuals preferred on occasion to assert themselves: the collective was for their particular benefit, not for the benefit of some mystical supra-individual entity. The District organisations, of course, sent their decisions back to the Lodges to be ratified and matters of great importance were usually decided by ballot of the membership. Even so, miners and their Lodges were prepared at times to go to some length to assert themselves against the District. Mt. Pleasant Lodge refused to participate in a District ballot.¹¹⁰ Bulli sought legal advice in order to place an injunction on the funds of the association,¹¹¹ officials from other Districts were directly invited by particular Lodges to address them on various matters, and some Lodges simply had nothing to do with the District organisation.¹¹²

On the other hand, the District, to do its job properly, was at times in the position of having to manipulate or coerce individuals. If District policy or actions did not satisfactorily deal with a problem at a particular mine, one remedy for the miners was to leave the union. District officials would then have to visit the mine 'for the purpose of assisting the local officers to reorganise the miners there'.¹¹³ Or the District might 'ask the Proprietors to assist us in bringing pressure to bear upon the non-unionists at all Collieries to join the Association'.¹¹⁴ To control miners and Lodges the District could also engage in the simple expedient of withholding information:

. . . the result of the ballot on the acceptance or otherwise of the Coal Owners' offer be suppressed from the branches and the public as a matter of policy for an indefinite time.¹¹⁵

In 1909 the Southern District executive officers managed both to withhold information from the miners about a new industrial agreement, and to attempt a compromise with the owners before consulting the miners. The following series of motions from the Lodges resulted: that aggregate meetings be held to discuss the proposed new industrial agreement; that the executive officers be given one month's notice to resign; that a vote of censure be passed on the executive officers and delegates for first submitting the new agreement to the coal owners and not to the men.¹¹⁶

V

Payment by the piece produced similar results among both miners and compositors in the Australian colonies between 1850 and 1930. Both developed ideas on how hard and how long a man should have to work

109. *Ibid.*, and 9 July 1908.

110. *Ibid.*, 14 August 1909.

111. *Ibid.*, and 8 September 1909.

112. As did Mt. Keira Lodge in the last half of the 1890s. They rejoined the District Union in 1900. Australian Labor Federation, Illawarra District Council, Minutes, 13 January 1900.

113. *Ibid.*, 24 January 1900.

114. *Ibid.*, 13 January 1904.

115. *Ibid.*, 24 January 1904.

116. Illawarra Colliery Employees' Association, Minutes, 8 April 1909.

in a day to make what satisfied them as a living wage. They therefore instituted through their Chapels and Lodges elaborate systems of special charges and conventions designed to compensate them for any special difficulties in the physical nature of their task. Conventions and special charges in one industry had close parallels in the other.

More important for the student of industrial relations is the effect that payment by the piece had on miners' and compositors' attitudes towards their fellows. In both industries, workers seeking to maximise their earnings frequently did so at the expense of their fellow workers. As a result Chapels and Lodges framed rules to deal with those who asserted their own independence as piece-workers to the point where they interfered with the independence of others. They also acquired a collective authority to enforce these rules and punish the offenders.

Chapels and Lodges thereby asserted independently a work discipline usually exercised by the management. Moreover, piece-workers in both industries required from their managements the same sort of independence they required from their fellow workers. They adopted conventions designed to protect this independence, and were prepared to take their stand on them if need be. Despite this, Chapels, Lodges, and even unions, in both industries on occasion were willing to co-operate with owners and managers to point of collusion. This was because the self-interest of the piece-workers in both industries led them directly to recognise that their own well-being depended on the owners and their capacity to attract business. Piece-work payment in combination with other circumstances reinforced this characteristic among compositors, and together these seem to explain their devotion to the gospels of abstinence and self-help.

Piece-work payment also influenced the attitude of miners and compositors towards unions. Chapels and Lodges were necessary to the successful operation of piece-work contract, and came into being before the unions. To them the piece-worker owed his first allegiance, and was frequently prepared to support the local organisation against the claims of the District or the union organisation as a whole. In coal mining, the multitude of local piece-work practices helped delay the federation of the Districts on a State-wide basis. In printing, piece-workers who had founded the union as an adjunct to the work of the Chapels were reluctant to admit to membership those new classifications of workers who became more numerous as printing technology developed. Their attitude to self-help—derived largely from the opportunities that piece-work offered—tended to cut them off from the rest of the trade union movement. In both industries, piece-work acted to diminish the chances of the union members developing a loyalty to a large entity like the working class.

Consideration of piece payment and its consequences in the mining and printing industries suggests a more complex view of unions and their behaviour than has so far obtained in Australian labour historiography. Most Australian trade union histories have been about the unions as institutions rather than about the unionists themselves. If we look from the bottom up, if we begin by asking what sort of work the unionist did, and how he was paid for it, we get another view of tensions within the union, and can formulate possible explanations for decisions which so far historians generally have considered only from the evidence of official records often written more to conceal than to explain.

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